DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 323 CE 052 702

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TITLE The Content and Functions of Labor Education in the Soviet Union.
PUB DATE 16 Mar 89
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University and College Labor Education Association (Portland, OR, March 16, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Employer Employee Relationship; Foreign Countries; *Labor Education; *Labor Relations; Union Members; *Unions; Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS *USSR

ABSTRACT

Labor unions in the U.S.S.R.--having emerged in Russia about 100 years after U.S. labor unions and been called by Lenin the "shock troops of the revolution"--do not much resemble their U.S. counterparts. Union members, including factory managers, constitute 99.3 percent of the work force, and place of employment or profession determines which of the 30 national unions workers belong to. Dues are 1 percent of wages. Local committees that formulate production norms for each 5-year plan include workers. Workers are expected to meet the 5-year plan in 4 years. Apportioned to the workers are such items as wage incentives, improved housing, rent subsidies, and space at day-care centers, hospitals, and vacation facilities at the Black Sea. Unions are to advocate for workers, but they do not fight for higher wages because wages are part of the 5-year plans and do not struggle with employers because there are so many job vacancies that employers do not give the union trouble. Trade union education, including two four-year institutions and a 5-year correspondence study option, is designed to train activists in their party responsibilities as well as to provide technical and professional education. (This information was collected during 6 weeks in the U.S.S.R. in 1984 and 1986.) (CML)

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Presentation at University and College Labor Education Association Annual Meeting - Portland Oregon - March 16, 1989

THE CONTENT AND FUNCTIONS OF LABOR EDUCATION IN THE SOVIET UNION
by George V. Boyle

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My credentials for this subject include a five week study tour hosted by the Higher Trade Union School during 1984 and a week long stay in 1986. Most of my time was spent at the School in Moscow but also I had a chance to visit and speak with labor representatives at trade union centers in Vladimir, Volgagrad, Volshkii, Baku and Tallinn. There were plant visits to the Moskvitch Auto Plant, the Sergo Ordzhonikidze Machine Tool Plant, a pipe welding plant, a hydroelectric power plant, oil fields and the Kirov Collective Fishery.

But, first of all, I want to disclaim any reputation as a Sovietologist. Sovietologists are compared to paleontologists who scratch around in the crust of the earth where they find a few scraps of petrified bone and perhaps a tooth or two. From these morsels they confidently construct an enormous skeleton down to the finest detail of what purports to be an authentic dinosaur.

In the Sovietologists case, inference, intuition and conjecture provide the wire, glue, plaster and even the "blue smoke and mirrors" to try to induce you to accept their skeletons as authentic. But let me hasten to add that our ignorance is not entirely self-induced. Unlike the United States where only the seal of the Catholic confessional seems to shield public sin and public debate from the prying eyes of the press, in the U.S.S.R. foreign reporters confront a wall of secrecy as blank, impenetrable and opaque as the Kremlin wall itself.

One frustrated authority honestly observed that trying to follow events there is akin to watching a dog fight taking place under a blanket. You know that something is going on but you don't know what. And remember Winston Churchill's remark that, "Russia is a mystery wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma."

Secondly, with respect to time and content, when we attended lectures at the Higher Trade Union School, we used to joke about some of the professors' answers to our questions. Frequently they were so long-winded and circuitous that we said if they were asked, "What time is it?", they would not only tell you how to make a watch but they also wanted to tell you how watches were made before the revolution and after the revolution. I won't take such a roundabout approach but, in order to understand the functions and content of labor education in that country, it is necessary to say something about the historical context of their unions.

As you no doubt know, the Industrial Revolution came late to Russia. About the same time that Abraham Lincoln emancipated the slaves in this country, Tsar Alexander II emancipated the serfs in that land. Serfs were owned by private land owners, the Russian

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Orthodox Church and by the state. They numbered in excess of 40 million souls at the time of emancipation. But their "freedom" was in large part illusory. They gained the freedom from being bought and sold as chattel. And they acquired the right to marry at will, to own property, to sue in courts of equity and to enter business in their own names. But the conditions to acquire land allotments which would allow them economic independence were brutal with respect to acquisition, size and terms. As a matter of fact the serfs received less land than they had used prior to emancipation. And the cost of acquiring it was so exorbitant that no amount of product raised on it would make the farmland profitable. Rental or resale of the land would also be unprofitable because of the initial price. And about ten percent (10%) of the serfs received no land at all.

"As a result the Ministry of the Interior reported no fewer than 647 incidents of peasant rioting in the first four months following the emancipation enactment. And during the year 1861 there were about 500 outbreaks of violence in the rural areas so severe that troops had to be used to suppress them."

For many of the peasantry, now dispossessed and landless, there was no alternative but to move to the growing cities where they would find employment in the mills and factories. In truth, the need for an industrial work force had been one of the motivations for uprooting the serfs. Forced off the land they fled to the cities in increasingly large numbers where both domestic and foreign capital expanded production.

While the conditions of the rural peasant had not been pleasant prior to his emancipation, his horrors of malnutrition and privation were compounded afterward and his misery drove him unsuccessfully to seek better conditions as part of the urban proletariat. (If you are interested in a graphic description of life in the villages of rural Russia and in the industrial centers on the eve of the 1917 Revolution you will find it in an excellent work entitled "In War's Dark Shadow" by W. Bruce Lincoln. I won't repeat that description here but I recommend it.)

In so far as the workers' organizations are concerned, just as unions were illegal outlaws and repressed for much of our early years, it is also true that they were proscribed by the Tsars. As a consequence they emerged in that troubled land about one hundred years after American unions and played a role in the aborted revolution of 1905. The Communist Party had been in existence for almost sixty (60) years prior to that date. And the Party had lent a helping hand in fomenting and assisting the emerging organizations. Lenin had called them "the shock troops of the revolution" and the workers' councils or soviets had been a significant factor in the 1917 uprising and in the coup d'etat against the Kerensky provisional government engineered by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

But once the revolution had been successfully executed and somewhat solidified the question arose as to the proper role of trade unions

in the socialist state on the road toward "the dictatorship of the proletariat."

The workers were feeling cocky, headstrong and rambunctious with new-found power and the government found the issue troublesome. The matter was not resolved until the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921.

There a debate took place over three potential models:

Model #1 called for trade union independence from both party and state control with a syndicalist structure of unions managing major sectors of the economy.

Model #2 encompassed complete subjugation and control of the unions by the party and state. This second position was advocated by Leon Trotsky and Nikolai Bukharin, (and you know what subsequently happened to them.) In this model the unions were to insure labor participation, raise productivity and enforce discipline in the workplace.

Model #3 was a proposal advocated by Lenin. It allowed for a small degree of union independence but only within the strict limits of Party and state policies and control. Unions were responsible for improving productivity but simultaneously they should try to prevent management abuse of the workers. And while they were to enforce labor discipline they were not supposed to coerce the workers as Trotsky and Bukharin might have advocated.

I'm sure you know whose view prevailed. Thus Lenin articulated the position that unions should serve as "schools of administration, schools of economic management and schools of communism." Lenin's construct envisioned trade unions building a communist society wherein:

1) the Party would express the "class principles" and ideology unifying the people and providing leadership;
2) the unions would express the "worker principles", teach them to manage the economy without capitalism and involve workers in that management.

But the schooling for such activities was in "the school of life" not in the classroom.

As a practical matter this means that the Soviet labor union functions resemble very little of what American trade unionists regards as the legitimate role of labor organizations. And we react negatively to the notion that the Party or the state should determine who will be the top union officials and office holders.

But what kind of organizations exist today in the USSR and what kind of Labor Education is provided?

First, there are 135 million union members, 99.3% of the work force. They are organized along the lines of the Shop Principle,

i.e. a worker's place of employment and/or profession determines which of the thirty (30) national unions to which he belongs. Thus unions don't have to engage in organizing campaigns or membership drives or worry about collecting dues. At 1% of wages, dues, together with income from enterprises provide approximately $5 billion per year for the All Union Central Council of Trade Unions and their affiliates.

Second, during the early years following the revolution, the workers were required to meet production targets which they felt were impossibly high. They complained that, if they must meet the production goals, they ought to have a say in determining them. As a consequence they were given the "production function" which they carry out today. The local committees formulate production norms for each Five Year Plan which are then forwarded to Gosplan, the Central Planning Committee. After the Plan is approved it is returned to the factory or enterprise where the workers are required to engage in "Socialist Emulation," or specifically to meet the five year goals in four years. This may seem akin to "Employee Involvement" or "Worker Participation" with a vengeance, except that everyone knows how the "game" is played and acts accordingly. As a result, the factory managers (who incidentally are also union members,) have a hard time getting a decent day's work out of their employees. A saying is bruited about there, "As long as you pretend to pay me enough money, I'll pretend to work hard enough to earn it." But the union leaders who are major players in this charade are trained to devise and monitor the yearly, monthly, weekly and daily progress toward the quotas. And the "eager beavers" who exceed their allotments are awarded certificates, what one cynical unionist called "wallpaper", for their efforts.

Third, and related to the above is the function of dividing the "profits" of the enterprise. This is called "cultural work". Part of each Plan are allocations of the proceeds of the enterprise which are returned to the workers. One official told us that most of his time was devoted to fighting Gosplan for the allocation they had been promised. Apportioned are wage incentives and bonuses, new and improved housing, rent and utility subsidies, day-care centers for children, hospitals, summer camps for workers' children, recreation centers, the Palace of Culture, Palaces of Sport, vacation facilities at the Black Sea and other facilities, most of which the unions own and administer. In some cases, such as the Moskvitch Auto Plant, the construction is financed and erected by the factory and then the facility is turned over to the union while the running maintenance is still subsidized by the factory. You should know also that 93% of all women of working age are employed while 50 million pre-school children are in day-care centers. That is 80% of all urban pre-schoolers and 40% of all rural.

This means that there is an enormous union administrative bureaucracy employed to run and maintain these facilities and activities. And the staffs must be trained by the unions.

Fourth, the unions have the function of worker protection and advocacy. Their collective bargaining agreements bear little resemblance to ours since most of the provisions regarding wages, benefits, hours and conditions of employment are embodied in law. But there are some conditions contained in local agreements. For example on the oil rigs in Baku that stretch 100 miles out into the Caspian Sea there are winds of enormous force which determine that buildings on land are usually constructed running east to west to lessen wind resistance. On the rigs every fifth worker is designated a safety representative with authority to shut down the job in case of hazardous conditions.

Also each worker has an individual contract either without term or for the life of the job. And he can't be dismissed except for cause. Where workers are dismissed the union represents them in the peoples' courts. And dismissals are overturned so often that employers use dismissal very infrequently. Further, up until now, there were so many skilled job vacancies and such a high quit-rate of 20% that a law was passed requiring workers to give 60 days notice before leaving to limit mobility and shortages. Thus labor education for workers protection, advocacy, negotiations and grievance administration takes place within this context.

A trade union official at Vladimir, a man named Beliaev, said most Americans ask three questions:

1) How do we fight for higher wages? Answer, we don't. Wages are part of the Plan we devise and right now in the banks there are 700 rubles, about four months wages, for every man, woman and child in the region.

2) How do unions struggle with their employers? Answer, they don't. In the Vladimir region there were 15,000 job vacancies and thus employers give them no trouble with lay-offs, firings or work sharing.

3) How do unions organize strikes? Answer, strikes for what? He had never had to deal with that issue.

A final function of the Soviet trade unions is their international responsibilities which includes hosting foreign groups, foreign travel for their members, training trade unionists from other countries and, of course, their activities in the World Federation of Trade Unions and other international organizations.

As can be seen, apart from some "lily gilding", the union functions, structure, responsibilities, and constraint of party and government controls circumscribe labor education as well as open up broad areas unfamiliar to us.

Organizationally, trade union education is part of a state-run system involving 162 regional schools in the fifteen republics. It is designed to train activists in their union and party responsibilities as well as to provide technical and professional

education for the staffs who run facilities used by about 10 million people annually.

There are two four-year institutions, the Higher Trade Union School in Moscow and a similar school in Leningrad. Enrolled students must have two years trade union experience, a secondary school diploma and be sponsored by their local unions. Upon completion of their four years of study they receive a diploma recognized by other higher education institutions that qualifies them for graduate study at Moscow State University or elsewhere. However, most return to the unions that sent them.

While at the School, their sponsoring unions pay the students a stipend to maintain income, taking into account family responsibilities. Tuition, room and board, books etc. are paid by the AUCCTU. The budget of the School is also paid by the AUCCTU.

The curriculum of study includes:

1) Political Training: Economic Theory, The Political Economy of Capitalist and Socialist Nations.

2) Philosophy: History of East and West, Dialectical Materialism, Party Ideology, Party History, Theory and Development of Marxist Thought.

3) Economic Thought and Sciences: Scientific and Economic Labor, Standardization of Labor, Production Planning, Statistics, Economic Analysis of the Enterprise, Economic Structures.

4) Sociological Analysis: Public Opinion, Professional Interests, Journalism, Social Management and Planning, Social Psychology.

5) Trade Union Sciences: History of Soviet Trade Unions, History of Foreign Trade Unions (including USA), Theory and Practice of Trade Unions, Protective Labor Legislation, Socialist Emulation.

Moreover there is a cultural component to the course of study which is optional but regarded as no less important. As Vice Rector Marat Baglai put it, "Culture shows the soul of the people", and the unions are convinced of its value as an institutional concern.

In addition there is correspondence study enrolling 1/2 million students. After five years of successful study the correspondents receive the same diploma as the four-year residential students.

Also the Higher Trade Union School has set up branch campuses in the more remote areas of the country and there is an International Department with faculty from 35 other countries.

Further, there are 120 professional social scientists engaged in research dealing with labor theory and practices. In all there are 250 faculty members in the Moscow, Leningrad and branch campuses.

But now, the concepts of peristroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) have emerged on the scene. In reading over my notes of lectures at the Higher Trade Union School in my 1984 journal I was struck by how often "restructuring" had been mentioned. This was one year before Gorbachev came to power. And other notes relate to Economics Professor Yuri Popov's extended treatment of what he called "a new consumption model" for their planned economy. This suggests that either we have been unaware of the planned restructuring that has been underway for some time or that the faculty of the Higher Trade Union School are at the cutting edge of those changes.

Regardless, the unions are an important element in the restructuring of many institutions. The HTUS asked me to return in 1986 to explain how Labor Education is organized in the United States, because, as part of perestroika, higher education is being reorganized and the HTUS was formulating and submitting their proposal to fit the new mode.

Now consider:

- with enterprises allowed to succeed or fail on their own;

- with lay-offs already occurring and planned, e.g. 10,000 railroad workers were laid-off in one of the republics and assigned to lower paid jobs;

- with private, profit making business allowed;

- with movement toward a mixed market economy and private farm production;

- with confession that the past and current system hasn't worked well enough and needs reorganization;

- with union shop elections procedures requiring multiple candidates;

- with a new 2250 member elected national congress;

- with food shortages, (in the words of a woman from Baku "We have more freedom but less food" . . . a terrible choice);

- with the current first budding of political, economic and social candor, debate and freedom; the trade unions face enormous and difficult challenges.

Their organizations and their Labor Education must undergo radical change.

Today is a very interesting time for an outsider to be observing that dog fight taking place under the blanket and scratching around in the visible crust of that society to construct the new skeleton of Labor Education in the USSR.